

Corrine Brown

1946–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM FLORIDA

1993–



Image courtesy of the Member

In 1992, **CORRINE BROWN** BECAME ONE OF THE FIRST African Americans elected to the U.S. House from Florida since the close of the Reconstruction Era. During her House career, from her seats on the Transportation and Infrastructure and the Veterans' Affairs committees, Congresswoman Brown regularly brought federal programs into her Jacksonville district. She also earned a reputation as a tireless advocate of civil rights.¹

Corrine Brown was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on November 11, 1946, and grew up in the city's Northside neighborhood, graduating from Stanton High School. As a single mother, she raised a daughter, Shantrel. She earned a bachelor of science degree at Florida Agriculture and Mechanical University in 1969 and an M.A. from the same institution in 1971. In 1972 Brown graduated with an Ed.S. degree from the University of Florida. She taught at the University of Florida and Edward Waters College before settling at Florida Community College in Jacksonville, where she taught and served as a guidance counselor from 1977 to 1992. Her close friend and political mentor, Gwen Cherry, was the first African-American woman elected to the Florida house of representatives. Cherry's death in a 1979 car crash prompted Brown toward elective politics. In 1980, she was a delegate for presidential candidate Senator Edward Kennedy at the Democratic National Convention. Two years later, Brown won a seat in the Florida legislature, where she served for a decade.

In 1992, reapportionment created a new district in northeastern Florida spanning the area from Jacksonville to Orlando. Brown won the Democratic nomination and ran a general election campaign that focused on improving the district's educational system, bringing more jobs to the area, and protecting Social Security and Medicare for the elderly. She won by 18 percentage points, making her one of three Florida candidates elected that year (including Alcee Hastings and Carrie Meek) who were the first African Americans to represent the state since Reconstruction. In her subsequent six elections, Brown won by comfortable margins. In 2004, she was elected to her seventh term without opposition in a district which still covered much of her original Jacksonville base.²

When Representative Brown took her seat in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995), she received assignments on the Government Operations Committee, the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the Public Works and Transportation Committee (later named Transportation and Infrastructure). In the 104th Congress (1995–1997), she resigned from Government Operations. Brown also served as vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus and as a member of the Women's Caucus.

Brown's primary focus is on improving the economy within her district, steering federal funds and projects into the north Florida region. She led the effort to construct an \$86 million federal courthouse in Jacksonville, while using her influence on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to initiate Florida rail projects to meet the state's booming transportation needs. In 1998, Brown orchestrated a nearly 60 percent increase in funding for federal transportation programs in Florida.³ While supporting reduction of the federal deficit by cutting welfare programs, Brown believed the system must be made "more advantageous for welfare recipients to get off welfare" by providing jobs and job training. "We must make sure that changes in the welfare system do not inadvertently hurt children," she added.⁴ Brown also supported military defense spending, in part, reflecting the large military presence in her district, most notably the Jacksonville Naval Air Station. But Brown wanted more of the money to flow into personnel training, describing the military as a place where working-class Americans could find opportunities unavailable elsewhere. From her seat on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Brown was particularly attentive to the needs of women veterans and health issues. After the 2000 elections, Brown was one of the most vocal advocates for voting reforms. To improve the voting process, especially in minority precincts, Representative Brown supported the Help America Vote Act of 2002, to streamline balloting procedures and provide money to modernize voting systems as a first step toward reform.⁵

Her interests have at times moved Brown's attention outside her district. In 1993, shortly after arriving on Capitol Hill, she began working behind the scenes to push the William J. Clinton administration to restore a democratic government in Haiti by installing deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. She also urged U.S. officials to process the thousands of Haitians who arrived in the U.S. seeking political asylum.⁶ Brown also has taken up the cause of Liberians, pushing to extend temporary visa status for thousands who came to America after a civil war in the African country during the early 1990s.

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Corrine Brown,"
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

1 Bruce I. Friedland, "Jacksonville's Pragmatic liberal U.S. Rep. Corrine Brown Passionately Pushes Her Causes and Delivers Bacon Back to City," 19 July 2000, *Florida Times-Union*: A1.

2 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,"
<http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.

3 *Politics in America*, 2002
(Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 215–216.

4 "Candidates' Forum," 6 November 1994, *Orlando Sentinel*: G7.

5 Conference Report on H.R. 3295, Help America Vote Act of 2002, *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 2nd sess. (10 October 2002): 7836.

6 "Testimony of Congresswoman Corrine Brown," 13 June 1994, Judiciary Subcommittee on International Law, Immigration, and Refugees, Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony.